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ABSTRACT

The author states that consultants generally pursue two goals: establishing communication with the consultee and helping the consultee to become a more effective problem solver. Consistent with these goals for the psychological school ccnsultant are personal construct theory and attribution theory. Personal constructs refer to the dimensions, both conventional and idiosyncratic, which are used to classify both events and objects. Attribution refers to the process bywhich people answer the question, "why," about events. The author discusses these two theories and characterizes some of the difficulties involved in translating them into practical guides for the consultant. Examples are presented of the practical advice that can be generated by the approach to consultation developed in this paper which was presented as part of a conference symposium entitled "Psychological Consultation in Educational Settings: Models and Problems from Without and Within." (RWP)

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"ATTRIBUTION" AND "PERSONAL CONSTRUCT" AS HEURISTIC DEVICES FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SCHOOL CONSULTANT

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In this paper, I will present some conceptual tools which I believe to be potentially useful in guiding psychological consultation in the schools. My ideas are intended to supplement, not replace, those major works on the consultation process (Argyris, 1970; Sarason, Levine, Goldenberg, Cherlin, & Bennett, 1966; Caplan, 1970) which deal with broad issues of consultant behavior and intervention strategy. The ideas presented here are tools for the analysis of situations which are likely to arise in many of the forms of consultation which a psychologist is likely to undertake in a school system.

What I hope to accomplish in the following discussion is the elaboration, in terms relevant to consultation practice, of two relatively well-developed analytic notions from personality and social psychology. The first is the notion of "attribution," which formed the cornerstone of Heider's (1958) psychology of "common sense" and which has been recently used with success (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967) in theoretically integrating a wide range of interpersonal phenomena. The second, conceived differently from, but philosophically compatible with, the first, is George Kelly's (1955) notion of the "personal construct." Both terms, attribution and personal construct, refer to processes which are presumed to go on in the minds of people as they attempt to make sense out of the objects and events which they perceive and experience.

"Attribution" refers to the process by which people answer the question "why" about events. It refers both to the process by which events are

interpreted as being the effects of certain causes and to the companion process by which the "cause" is mentally endowed with the capability, disposition and/or tendency to produce the "effect." As a mundane example, suppose one has the experience of finding grains of plaster on the floor. Far from merely sweeping them up, one typically attributes their presence to some defect in the ceiling.

"Personal constructs" refer to the dimensions, both conventional and idiosyncratic, which are used to classify both events and objects. In the example just given, the concept of "defectiveness" is being employed to classify the state of the ceiling. The implications of the label "defective" may vary from individual to individual, depending on its connection with other concepts, such as "good-bad," "importance," etc. All of this "processing" is relatively automatic. It occurs "preconsciously" before any action is taken.

Both attribution theory and personal construct theory characterize people as not merely reacting to immediate stimuli. Rather, they are seen as constantly translating the uniqueness of the ever-changing present into some enduring and organized system of ideas. The system which is thereby personally imposed on reality enables people to live in a comprehensible world, a world in which actions can be planned with some foreknowledge of their most probable outcomes. It is clear, in the case of the mythical homeowner above, that his attributions and personal constructs give him control over the events which he would not have if he merely employed a broom. That is, he can be relatively sure that, once appropriate action is taken, plaster will not keep appearing on his floor.

On the other hand, even while this imposed order is necessary and inevitable, it can have certain costs. Since the employment of attributions

and personal constructs always involves a selection from a universe of alternative "formulations," some alternatives must always be sacrificed in favor of others. As one becomes increasingly committed to particular personal constructs or attributions, one may lose the ability to use others which are incompatible. In the homeowner example we have employed so far, the cost is not likely to be great because the number of alternative ways of seeing the particular slice of reality under consideration are few. This happy situation does not exist, however, in complex social situations such as schools. In the schools, everyone who must perform a function has a set of attributional preferences and personal constructs which he employs. Although these are vital to the individuals involved, enabling them to function day to day, they become a liability when special problems arise and new ways of thinking are called for. Let me now illustrate this problem with an example from my experience as a psychological consultant in the schools.

Personal Anecdote and Case Example

I came to develop some of my present ideas as a result of experiences in the school year 1972-73, during which I was available two days a week to the entire staff of a middle school as a "psychological consultant." In this intervention, partly out of ignorance and partly in response to political realities, I entered the school in the most expedient way rather than following the prescriptions of a major consultation theory. Beyond distributing a memorandum announcing my availability to all staff members separately and collectively, I offered nothing to circumscribe or delineate my role. The nature of this ambiguous entry assured that I had no clearly defined single client. Furthermore, I made no attempt to address the entire

collectivity of the school as my client, as some consultation theories (Argyris, 1970) would advocate. Rather, my situation was like that of a new doctor in a small town who hangs out his shingle and waits for patients. I was forced to think "microcosmically" about each consultant-consultee interaction, and thus developed my ideas somewhat differently than theorists who have been concerned with major goals and directions of a coordinated consultation effort.

I firmly believe, nevertheless, that certain "microcosmic" issues must be faced by psychological consultants in the schools no matter what major guiding principles they may follow. One of the most persistent and puzzling of these issues consisted of the impression that I and the client facing me were not talking about the same "problem." I now believe that this impression came about because, in reacting to the events which constituted the problem "stimulus," we each attributed these events to different causes and mobilized different personal constructs. Rather than being conscious of this process, we each tended to think as if the attributed causes and imposed categories were the problem, and became exasperated with each other because, to each of us, the other seemed to be addressing "irrelevant" issues. As just one of many possibile examples I can think of, let me describe a conversation which I had with a teacher about a dilemma which came up for him in the process of grading a paper.

The "stimulus" in this case was a test paper, approximately 80% correct, which had been completed by a student with a severe reading problem and a rather passive, withdrawn style. The student had taken the paper to a special teacher so that the questions could be read to him. However, from our knowledge of the child and his conceptual weaknesses, it appeared unlikely that he could have done as well as he did unless he had practically

been told the answers.

For both the teacher and me, there were certain indisputible facts, and certain areas which were unknown, but which we filled in by an attributive process. Indisputible was the fact of the test paper and our knowledge of the child's ability. Unknown to us was precisely what had happened when the child went to the special teacher with the test paper. But, each of us nevertheless filled in necessary blanks by attribution so that each of us had an idea of what the problem was. Rather than describe the conversation in detail, I will now state what I later inferred to be the major viewpoints, the teacher's and mine.

The teacher saw the child as "defective" and consequently not responsible for his actions. At the same time, he perceived that a certain "authority cluster" in the school, consisting of the principal, the special teacher, and certain higher administration "experts," had collectively mandated that this "defective" child ought to remain in his class and be treated as part of the group. I was identified with the authorities in his mind, and it was in the spirit of that attribution that he approached me. He felt that what the authorities wanted him to do was to maintain the illusion that the child was "normal." He felt further that he had tried to carry out that mandate, although grudgingly, and it had led him to a position where he was now being asked to do something which he felt was "wrong" and would probably be harmful to the child: i.e., give him a mark he didn't "deserve."

My thinking at the time was somewhat different. My own personal constructs did not include the notion of "defectiveness" as implying lack of personal responsibility for ones actions. Rather, I saw the child as wishing to succeed, like anyone else, and particularly motivated to

preserve whatever was left of his self-esteem. I surmised that, faced with an impossible test, he had used every trick in the book in his interaction with the special teacher and that she had not had her heart in trying to resist his manipulations. I felt the true problem, however, to be in the fact that such a difficult test was given to him. This, in turn, I attributed to the classroom teacher's lack of faith in the child's ability to learn. I perceived him as going through the motions of 'teaching" the child quite mechanically.

It should be clear that the different versions of the "problem" held by each of us were sufficient to produce a feeling of "talking at cross purposes." In fact, the intervention ended with nothing having been accomplished. I now believe that this negative outcome might have been avoided if I had been aware, at the time, of all the attributions and assumptions which each of us were mobilizing. I will now attempt to develop some notions, both general and specific, which may help focus the consultant's attention on crucial attributions and assumptions of the consultee and of himself.

Two Views of Man and Their Implications for Consultation

I would like to begin my analysis of the attributions and personal constructs of consultants and consultees with reference to an alternative and perhaps more popular formulation of their interaction: that is, the formulation in terms of personal <u>motives</u> and <u>drives</u>, implying a philosophy I shall call "man the pleasure-seeker." I would like to suggest that this philosophy underlies a number of psychological theories, including both psychoanalysis and a variety of "stimulus-response-reinforcement" formulations. For example, psychoanalysis speaks in terms of pleasurable "objects"

which in turn give rise to the possibility of loss and thence conflict, anxiety and defense mechanisms. In "reinforcement" terminology, the pleasurable qualities of the reinforcer are also implicit.

When a consultation interaction is viewed in the above light, man's pleasure-seeking propensity is seen as setting up "forces" which must be dealt with somehow. The role of the consultant becomes one of either harnessing or transcending these forces, depending on his particular consultation theory. In the previous case example, for instance, the interactions between the teacher and me could be formulated in terms of loyalties, empathies, and needs. Specifically, I might appear to be loyal to the child, principal, and special teacher, while the teacher who consulted me might be seen as loyal to himself, his teaching peers, and his classroom. As I have suggested, many theoreticians of consultation would see the consultant's task as one of "harnessing" or "transcending" these loyalties. Alinsky (1971) appears to be a "harnesser" and would perhaps suggest that a valid role for the consultant would be to become an official advocate for certain forces in the school. Caplan (1970) appears to be more of a "transcender" and might see the "loyalties" of consultant and consultee as potentially disruptive to the effectiveness of their interaction.

Introspection tells me that I do have many loyalties and that I did have loyalties to the child, special teacher, and principal on the above occasion. Thus, I would not claim that the suggestions I have just associated with Alinsky and Caplan are "incorrect" ones. Nevertheless, I believe that they do have limitations as heuristic concepts for the consultant. When the case example is formulated in terms of loyalties and conflicts, the disagreement between consultant and consultee over how the

problem is viewed can be accounted for, but the enterprise of trying to resolve it tends to take us deep into the complex intrapsychic processes of two individuals. I have found myself wondering whether such a deep intrapsychic exploration is either necessary or sufficient to accomplish the rather limited goals which consultants generally pursue, the goals of (a) establishing communication with the consultee and (b) helping the consultee become a more effective problem solver.

The two goals of the consultant just stated seem to me to be most clearly facillitated when one adopts a view of man which Heider and Kelly, among others, seemed to share, and which is different from the pleasure-seeker" view described earlier. I call this view "man the language-builder." Personal constructs and attributions, after all, represent a particular "language of ideas" developed in order to organize and understand events. Although this tendency to organize and understand may, in turn, ultimately depend on man's search for pleasure, what makes the language builder view different is that, in it, most interpersonal events are seen as immediately determined by the participants' <u>ideas</u> rather than their <u>needs</u>. This is consistent with the consultant's goal of communication because communication is, first and foremost, the transfer of ideas from one individual to another. It is also consistent with the goal of helping the consultee become a more effective problem solver because problem solving is really a cognitive process. Solving a problem can often depend on having the appropriate repertoire of ideas. It will be noted, however, that I speak of "appropriate" repertoires of ideas rather than "good" ones. I believe that it is part and parcel of the "language-builder" view of man that languages are evaluated only in terms of their effectiveness. There are no inherently "correct" ways of viewing the world, but some ways may be better suited than

others for processing certain classes of problems.

Having stated a general philosophical framework for consultation and suggested that personal construct and attribution theories are broadly consistent with that framework, I would now like to turn attention to some particular characteristics of these two parent theories. I will then briefly characterize some of the difficulties involved in translating these theoretical statements into practical guides for the consultant, and finally state some examples of the practical advice that I believe can be generated by the approach to consultation developed in this paper.

Requirements of a Consultation "Heuristic"

Both Heider and Kelly, the seminal thinkers in attribution and personal construct theory, seem to have possessed the view of man I have called "man the language-builder." Since my personal experiences have convinced me that such a view is a useful one for a consultant, I have set myself the task of attempting to develop a consultation "heuristic" from these theories. However, in so doing, I have found that each theory is incomplete without the other in dealing with the realities faced by consultants. I would now like to describe some of the difficulties which come about in translating a theoretical model into an action model and demonstrate how two theories together provide a stronger basis for a heuristic model than either one would taken alone.

Attribution theory and personal construct theory are each rich theoretical statements, capable of dealing with wide ranges of social phenomena. I initially characterized them as explanations of the processes by which people organize reality, attribution theory seeing people as attempting to answer "why" questions and personal construct theory seeing

them as attempting to answer "what" questions. The differential emphasis, however, by no means implies that these two theories have mutually exclusive domains. In practice, why and what questions are usually closely related to one another. For example, let us consider the following attribution statement: "the child did not do what I told her to do because she is a rebellious child." As phrased, the statement answers a why question, and attribution theory would emphasize that the child, rather than the self or the situation, is seen as the cause of the event. However, the statement also contains a personal construct in the form of the implied dichotomy between rebellious and nonrebellious children. It thus also answers a what question. Attribution and personal constructs often coexist. Thus, although each theory is phased elegantly and deductively, using as few different terms as possible, it is clearly possible to use terms from either one to describe the same phenomena.

Despite the overlap just described, the two theories do develop somewhat different implications. Since attribution theory operates upon "the event," its time perspective tends to be the immediate situation in which "the event" takes place. In the above example, to use Harold Kelley's (1967) particularly elegant version of attribution theory, the attributional analysis would concern itself with immediate antecedents of the attribution, predicting that the particular statement ("the child did not do what I told her to do because she is a rebellious child") is most likely to be believed under the following conditions: (a) the "distinctiveness" criterion (whatever is seen as the cause, in this case the child's rebelliousness, is present when the effect is present and absent when it is absent), (b) the "consistency criterion" (the linkage of the cause and effect is observed repeatedly under a variety of different

conditions), and (c) the "consensus" criterion (the same causal connection is seen by many different observers). This analysis will be useful to the consultant whenever he is interested in understanding why particular attributions are made in particular situations or if he is interested in encouraging the employment of a different attribution. We will have occasion to refer repeatedly to Kelley's three criteria in the remainder of the paper.

It should be clear, however, as Kelley himself states, that attribution theory deals with general laws, not individual differences. Kelley considered it a current weakness of the theory that it failed to characterize "personality differences in the attribution process" and also failed to take account of "the importance of labeling [in producing] attribution stability" (Kelley, 1967, p. 235). I would like to add that attribution theory also fails to take account of attribution styles that are characteristic of most or all school personnel simply by virtue of their participation in the school "culture," (Sarason, 1970) and also those which are characteristic of a particular role in the school, such as teacher or principal.

The above short-comings of attributional analysis are made up for by the simultaneous employment of concepts from personal construct theory. The time perspective of the latter theory includes the entire life-history of the "construct bearing" individual. This comes about because an individual's constructs are defined by their previous instances. It is the previous instances of rebellious and non-rebellious children in the personal experience of the teacher, for instance, which give meaning to the word "rebellious" in the above example. Personal construct theory thus gives us a language for dealing with individual differences and with the role of

'labelling' mentioned by Kelley. Although it does not specifically give us a language for dealing with the school 'culture," I feel it would be possible to meaningfully expand it in order to do so. What is necessary in order to do so is to refer the meaning of constructs, not to the individual experiences of individuals, but to the collective experiences of all the individuals in a school. This collective experience can be seen as transcending the period of time during which any one individual may be a member of the school staff, and the constructs developed in the context of this collective experience can be seen as transmitted directly to newcomers in the process of initiating them into the belief system of the school. For example, if it is part of a school's 'cultural" values that talking in the hallways is a very serious offense, new staff members will tend to adopt that construct even though they did not have it to begin with.

Some problems of application are not delt with explicitly by either attribution theory or personal construct theory. Specifically, there is the problem mentioned by Kelly (1967, p. 235) of characterizing the "relation between the common man's attribution processes and the more systematic processes incorporated in scientific methods." This can be particularly important for the consultant because certainly he and probably others in the school possess some ideas from 'scientific' psychology while others rely more on common sense. A second application problem arises because attribution theory was developed in terms of the attributions which individuals make about the characteristics of other individuals. However, there is a need for the consultant to be able to deal with school staff members' attitudes towards groups, such as families and classes, and about organizations, such as the school as the whole.

Dimensions for Consultants to Consider

In the remainder of the paper, I would like to describe just a few of the areas in which personal construct and attribution theories might be particularly useful for the consultant. The areas covered exhaust neither the list of areas which I have found it useful to think about in these terms nor the list of areas which might be elucidated by the general system of ideas I have been developing.

In dealing with each area, I have chosen to focus on three general aspects of the consultant's task. These are (a) the discovery of personal constructs and attributions of the consultee which are relatively "fixed" (what we might call his "core" constructs) and the careful phrasing of consultant advice so as not to conflict with these, (b) the discovery of personal constructs and attributions of the consultee which might be more easily altered and which, if altered, would improve problem solving behavior, and (c) the critical examination of the consultant's own attributions and personal constructs in the light of the theory.

Personal and impersonal causes.

The first dimension which the consultant might find useful to consider is Heider's (1958) distinction between personal and impersonal causes. Heider noted that the ways in which "common sense" perceives the actions of individuals is far different than the way it conceives of events which are seen as occuring either by "chance" or in the working out of deterministic laws. In its simplest form, Heider's distinction came down to the fact that people seem to intend to do what they do, whereas impersonal causes do not. In practice, however, the relative "personalness" of a cause does not come down simply to whether a person was observed to be involved in the action. Let us consider two examples. First, a child who fails at a given

task may not necessarily be seen as "intending" to fail. The ability of the child is an example of a trait whose functioning is relatively impersonal. i.e., beyond the child's control. Second, if a teacher finds himself thwarted repeatedly from obtaining needed supplies, he may assume that someone "intends" to keep him from getting them even though he has never observed anyone in the actual act of carrying out that intention. In the latter case, the inference of personal cause is made "by default" because the pattern of events is one which does not readily occur by chance or in the working out of physical laws.

Personal and impersonal causes have particularly strong implications when their effect is unpleasant, or constitutes a problem. The implication of greatest importance is that only personal causes can be recipients of blame. In other words, personal causes seem to mobilize a retributive response (punish the offender) rather than a solution (analyze the situation, identify critical variables, and modify them). The retributive response, although sometimes perceived as totally irrational, is actually based on sound, although simple, instrumental logic. An entity which is perceived as having intentions will, of course, be seen as likely to modify those intentions if the intended actions are found to be followed by punishment. On the other hand, retribution is clearly irrational when applied to entities which have no intentions and hence no control over their actions.

As I have suggested, the retributive response is often characterized as irrational. From personal experience, I know that it is very easy for consultants to "blame" those teachers who blame their students for the things which go wrong in their classes. Clearly, the consultant's feeling that the teacher is being irrational and also "wrong" is better coped with if it can be reduced, at least on a conceptual level, to a question of

disagreement about whether the cause is indeed a "personal" one. The teacher believes that problems in his class are personally caused, while the consultant believes they are impersonally caused. I will have more to say about this phenomenon shortly.

Although some useful implications for the consultant are, I believe, already present in what has been stated about personal and impersonal forms of causation, I would now like to analyze the consultant's role more thoroughly with regard to particular problems which arise in this area. I will do this with special reference to Kelley's question about "the relation between the common man's attribution processes and the more systematic processes incorporated in scientific methods." For, the consultant does typically have a more 'scientific' way of thinking than his consultee. I believe that it is characteristic of the more 'scientific' forms of psychology, as opposed to 'common sense' psychology, that they tend to substitute impersonal causes for personal ones wherever possible. This is not to say that the concept of intentionality is always absent. In some psychologists (those which posit "unconscious motivation" in particular) the concept of intentionality may even have an <u>expanded</u> field of applicability. However, in these cases the concept is "depersonalized" by stripping it of the property most characteristic of it in the common sense view: the property of being under the individual's control. Thus, personal causation, in the sense in which we have been using the term, <u>is</u> greatly reduced in scientific psychology. A typical problem in consultation, then, is likely to be that events which are viewed as personally caused by the consultee are viewed as impersonally caused by the consultant. As an example, let us examine a typical and plausible teacher statement: "he's always trying to disrupt the class. I can't let him get away with that." How will the consultant now

proceed to address the three major tasks which I previously enumerated?

First, what advice can the consultant give which will be compatible with the teacher's "core constructs"? Clearly, any attempt to speak of the dynamics of the child, of psychological forces which may compel him to act the way he does, will be incompatible. My personal experience suggests to me that it is the exception rather than the rule for a teacher to be able to respond meaningfully to such an intrapsychic explanation if she indeed believes that the child's actions are intentional in the common sense meaning of that concept. Rather, the consultant might concentrate on the issue of what strategy to use to change the child's presumed intentions. He might try to demonstrate that persuasion is superior to punishment or that the provision of meaningful incentives is preferable to either.

Second, how might the consultant determine whether the teacher's attribution could be changed and in what direction might it be most useful to change it? Here Kelley's analysis of the major immediate supports of a single attribution can be most useful. The consultant might attempt to determine to what extent consistency, distinctiveness and consensus are playing a role in supporting the attribution. The dimension of consistency (does the presumed cause appear in a variety of different situations) can be particularly important because intentional acts are usually <u>not</u> performed in all situations. Thus, if the child disrupts the class by talking softly to himself, and it can be demonstrated that the child <u>always</u> talks to himself, the teacher may be convinced that the child does not indeed intend to disrupt the class.

Thirdly, how may the consultant usefully examine his own attributions in the critical light of theory? In general, the consultant should be especially careful that his psychological sophistication is not actually

getting in the way of giving good advice. Does it really help if the child is not seen as responsible for his own actions? I believe that it does only if one of the two following conditions holds: (a) the child is suffering as a result of being blamed for something or (b) there is a way of solving the problem which depends on identifying its impersonal cause.

It should not be inferred from the above example, however, that the consultant is always the possessor of a "scientific" view while the consultee holds a "common sense" one. Sometimes exactly the opposite occurs. On the one hand, no psychologist, however scientific, altogether abandons personal causation; if he did his psychology would be "mechanistic." On the other hand, school personnel have certain scientific notions of their own. Typically, they have been exposed to some scientific psychology in college courses and also have been encouraged by professional practice to view certain concepts (retardation, achievement level, learning disabilities, etc.) as constituting impersonal causes. When these impersonal causes are employed to excess it may be necessary for the consultant to "rehumanize" the concepts by partially repersonalizing them. He may need to demonstrate that certain impersonal causes (i.e., a learning disability) can account for some of a child's actions, but that many or most of the actions of the child can still be viewed in a "common sense" light.

The case example given earlier in the paper contains an instance of the inappropriate use of an impersonal cause by a teacher. In that example, the teacher believed that the student could not be held responsible for copying answers on the test because he was a defective child. I, on the other hand, believed that he could and should be given credit for having done what he did deliberately and consciously. A useful property of my own personal constructs, in that instance, were that they allowed me to see the

child's actions as personally caused while still permitting me to employ some impersonal causes (the excessive "difficulty" of the test) to suggest a solution which did not require "blaming" the child. The teacher's personal constructs, in contrast, implied that there was a necessary connection between viewing the child as acting intentially and "blaming" or punishing him. Although I did not actually do so, it is interesting to speculate about the probable outcome of my directly addressing this issue and attempting to modify the teacher's maladaptive personal construct.

Levels of organization of personal causes.

As I have suggested, Heider and Kelly had a primary interest in the concepts which individuals have about other individuals. In thinking about the application of their theories to consultation, however, I have had to depart from that primary focus and consider the attributions which individuals make concerning the causal roles of what may be called "higher" levels of social organization. Specifically, although a great many of the important attributions possessed by teachers concern individuals, a great many concern such things as the relationship between two children, the characteristics of a group (such as a class), the atmosphere of an entire school, or the demands of society. This concern with higher levels of social organization is even greater for school officials higher on the hierarchy, such as principals or superintendents of schools. I shall discuss the issue of attributions concerning higher levels of social organization in terms of a few specific phenomena which seem to characterize the way these higher levels are processed in common sense.

The personalization of higher entities. The sciences, such as sociology, which deal with group and social phenomena, have generally used even more impersonal terminology than that used by psychologists. However, the

fact remains that common sense often personalizes groups, organizations or even society, as the following three statements illustrate: "society demands that children be educated," "the class is acting up," "the school refused to respond to community pressures for change." I would like to suggest that this personalization of higher entities is a phenomenon which the consultant can make use of, "exploit," if you will, in attempting to alter the attribution tendencies of individuals who have a strong preference for seeing the world in terms of personal causes.

As an example of how the personalization of a class might be helpful to a consultant, let us consider the case of a teacher who believes that a certain child is a "ring leader:" i.e., possesses both the ability and intention to disrupt the class and frequently does so. The teacher has a blaming and retributive response to this child, which is harmful to his general growth and does not lead to any noticible improvement. One choice open to the consultant is to attempt to convince the teacher that there are certain reasons why the child acts the way he does--to focus her attention on impersonal causes of an intrapsychic or interpersonal nature. However, as we have previously suggested, such a change may not be possible for the teacher because her reliance on personal causes may result from a "core construct." In such a case, it may be easier for the consultant to focus the teacher's attention on the readiness of the <u>class</u> to be disrupted. By encouraging her to see the class as being <u>motivated</u> to engage in chaos and as <u>welcoming</u> disruptions from any source, her tendency to blame the individual is reduced and her ensuing focusing of her attention on the whole group may well lead to better coping. A larger social entity can be "blamed" with less likelihood of harmful consequences than can an individual.

To make clear how a consultant might encourage an attribution to a class

as a personal cause, I would like to refer once again to Kelley's triad of consistency, distinctiveness and consensus. In this case, the relevant dimension is distinctiveness (the cause is always present when the effect is present and absent when it is absent). If the consultant can demonstrate that other children have disrupted the class, then the role of this particular child will no longer be distinctive and will not be seen as a cause. A cause which is distinctive will be substituted. The teacher may perceive that the readiness of this particular group (the class) to be disrupted is greater than that of other groups with which he is acquainted.

Preference for certain levels. There is already a problem implicit in the example given in the preceding paragraph. That is, sometimes a consultant may wish to have people think in terms of groups or organizations as causes even when there is nothing to support such an attribution. In the above example, it may be that the class is not unusually disruptable and the disruption is indeed always precipitated by one child. All the attributional evidence points to the child, yet the consultant still believes that "group process" is responsible.

The essence of the above example consists in the fact that the consultant prefers to think at the group level while the teacher prefers to think at the individual level. What makes it particularly difficult for the consultant is that the usual attributional criteria, consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus, all operate to support the teacher's view and refute the consultant's view, at least in the immediate context. It certainly seems as if the child is a distinctive and consistent cause of disruption, and he is widely viewed that way.

Effective functioning for the consultant in this case probably depends on a careful attributional analysis of his own beliefs with an eye toward

determining how he came to hold them. He may then have the basis for judging whether it might be feasible to try to reproduce some of the conditions of his own learning in order to produce learning in the teacher. It is quite likely, however, that the end result of the consultant's introspection will be to conclude that there are not adequate grounds for changing the teacher's level of analysis. Nevertheless, simply knowing that certain individuals seem to prefer certain levels can be useful to him in avoiding unnecessary and counterproductive conflicts.

Assimilation by the membership. A final interesting property of common sense views of larger social entities has to do with the fact that what is attributed to a group or organization may frequently be seen as characteristic of the membership rather than the entity as a "structured whole." To make clear what I mean, let me return to the original example of the teacher and the test paper.

In that example, a key issue, which remained largely implicit but which had important implications for my interaction with the teacher, was the difference in how we viewed classes, the phenomenon of membership in classes, and the concept of ability level as applied to classes. It will be recalled that the teacher saw the child as "defective" and hence not really belonging to the class. Clearly, the teacher believed that a class was a place where everyone had approximately the same ability--those who didn't were not really "members" of the class although they might occupy a seat in the room. This is an example of a cognitive structure which Gestalt theorists (as summarized by Heider, 1958) characterized as being dominated by the law of "assimilation and contrast." The teacher tended to divide students into those who fit and those who did not. Those who fit were seen as being more similar to each other than they really were and those who did

not fit were seen as being more different from the others than they really were. Part and parcel of this "assimilation and contrast" structure was the tendency to see group characteristics as residing in the membership (they all had the same "ability level") rather than in the group structure (there was a certain level of "difficulty of the material" which still allows, however, for the possibility that some students may absorb far more of it than others). The fact that the teacher assimilated group characteristics to the membership was a primary factor keeping him from seeing the child as part of the class.

It is my belief that "assimilation by the membership" represents a phenomenon which is very common. It seems to be one of the very few universal laws of psychology that simple structures are initially imposed by the mind and only become differentiated if there is some pressure towards differentiation. The consultant is typically called in in precisely those instances where the simple structure which has proven adequate for so long has failed to deal with some difficult instance or other. I must confess that I have no easy solution for how to deal with this phenomenon. Thus, my recommendations are likely to be somewhat unsatisfactory.

The enterprise of actually changing the cognitive structures which people use to think about groups and organizations is a particularly tricky one. I believe that, in this case, the "culture of the school" (Sarason, 1970) and the Kelley dimension of consensus are of particular importance. It is unlikely that an individual teacher will begin to think in more differentiated terms on the advice of a consultant if the dominant way of thinking in the school is in terms of "assimilation by the membership." Sarason has emphasized that interventions designed to change fundamental "regularities" in the schools often come to grief. While certain forums,

such as teacher training programs (Sarason, Davidson, & Blatt, 1962) may provide viable leverage points for some kinds of change in this general realm, the individual consultant may be relatively powerless to change forms of thinking which are so institutionalized.

On the other hand, one need not be nearly so pessimistic about changing the specific attributions which arise in the course of a teacher's attempting to account for those "puzzling" events which do not fit easily into the overall "assimilation and contrast structure." In the case of the teacher and the test paper, for example, the consultant could significantly affect the teacher's adaptive functioning even though he did nothing to change the way he thought about classes and ability levels. He could do this by addressing what I shall call a "secondary attribution."

In order for the teacher in the main case example to accept the fact that this child, who wasn't really a member of the class, was sitting in his classroom and being treated "as if" he really was a member, he had to have a satisfactory explanation. He resorted to a "secondary" attribution, attributing the child's presence in the class to the fact that certain authorities wanted him to be there. This "secondary attribution" was maladaptive because it resulted in a particularly low level of commitment on the teacher's part. Thus, a meaningful role for the consultant might be to try and change this secondary attribution to one which resulted in a higher degree of commitment. For example, the teacher might be induced to regard the presence of the child as a potential learning experience for him ("learn how to help that kind of child because I might go into special education someday"). The general principle illustrated is that of finding the attributions which may be changed rather than worrying about the ones which are difficult to change.

Conclusion

I have discussed only a few of the ways in which attribution and personal construct theories might be applied to the consultation process. I hope that the examples I have given will demonstrate the potential fruitfulness of the approach, and lead to further developments and elaborations.

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